



Bìsíwéérí: songs of a Muslim Chamba woman (Gongola State, Nigeria)

Raymond Boyd, Richard Fardon

► To cite this version:

Raymond Boyd, Richard Fardon. Bìsíwéérí: songs of a Muslim Chamba woman (Gongola State, Nigeria). African languages and cultures, 1992, 5 (1), pp.11-41. hal-00437971

HAL Id: hal-00437971

<https://hal.science/hal-00437971>

Submitted on 1 Dec 2009

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Cette version comporte une mise à jour de la traduction mot à mot des énoncés tchamba ainsi que des traductions anglaises correspondantes. En outre, quelques corrections et précisions ont été effectuées afin d'améliorer la lisibilité du texte.

Bìsíwéǹrí: songs of a Muslim Chamba woman (Gongola State, Nigeria)

Raymond Boyd (CNRS, Paris)
Richard Fardon (SOAS, London)

Introduction

The songs presented here came into our hands in an unusual fashion. Bìsíwéǹrí, their composer, was a Muslim Chamba woman from the northern Shebshi mountain area of Chambaland (now in the north of Ganye Local Government Area, hereafter LGA); she died in March 1989 aged about eighty. Neither of us met Bìsíwéǹrí, but we know two of her sons: Alhaji Saajo Aliyu (one time Secretary for Education in Ganye LGA), and Jibrillah Aliyu (presently a senior official in the Ministry of Education in Gongola State, Yola). During her lifetime, Bìsíwéǹrí gained local fame as a composer of songs that featured in public dances; the more popular of these remained in local repertoires for several years. In her old age, her son Alhaji Saajo Aliyu, persuaded Bìsíwéǹrí to make a cassette recording of some of her favourite songs. In a few cases, she added some words of explanation for her younger listeners, but generally she must have thought the songs would be understood by members of her family, who had heard them before and knew how they related to events in her life. We have taken the opportunity to ask her sons for help in interpreting the songs; but we did not talk to Bìsíwéǹrí before her death nor have we heard the songs in other performances. For this reason, our indications of the dynamics of performance are necessarily minimal. Our source is unusual in these respects, but it may become less so, given the impact of the audiocassette in African villages.

The language of the songs, Chamba, called *Sámá mūm* by its speakers, is known to specialists as Chamba Daka, to distinguish it from the neighbouring Chamba Leko. No modern linguistic studies of this language have been published, and there is no standard orthography. This is the first publication to use an accurate transcription of Chamba¹. It is, therefore, necessary for us to append an extended note explaining the conventions we use to write Chamba. We hope that this will be of particular interest to Chamba readers, and that local reaction will enable us speedily to settle on a practical orthography that may depart in some respects from that used here.

Background

Bìsíwéǹrí's life spanned two World Wars and three periods of government: born towards the end of German colonialism in Kamerun, she lived throughout the entire period of British mandate (and later trusteeship) of the Cameroons, and for almost three decades following Nigerian independence and her husband's death. The clan into which Bìsíwéǹrí married had been the most powerful of the Chamba patriclans of the northern Shebshi area just prior to colonisation (see figure 1 for a genealogy and figure 2 for a map of the area). Her husband, the most important figure in the songs apart from herself, had successfully managed the family fortunes during British colonialism and secured administrative appointment as a court assessor. His position was the springboard to relative success and prosperity for Bìsíwéǹrí and her children: four of Bìsíwéǹrí's children have made the haj, and two of her sons have occupied high offices in the administration of education in Gongola State and Ganye LGA. Bìsíwéǹrí's life with her husband, as she recounts it in her songs, offers a vignette of the transition he oversaw from membership of a prestigious patriclan, to local eminence as a Muslim and member of the colonial

administration, and finally to the success of her children in independent Nigeria.

According to local tradition, the patriclan into which Bisiwéérí was born was of Bata origin. Her grandfather left Demsa (now in Numan LGA) and reached the Mbulo region at the head of a Bata hunting party. He is assumed to have been a prince, since Bata hunting parties are reputedly led by high-ranking men. Arriving at Mbulo, he decided to establish a settlement, which became known as Mbulo Koombewal (apparently from the Fulfulde for 'boat')². His son, Kàmbé, married Gāārú, a Chamba woman from the nearby, original settlement of Mbulo. Bisiwéérí was their daughter. Later, she became the second wife of Aliyu Umaru (he had taken the name of his father Umaru, just as his own sons were later to take his name Aliyu).

Aliyu Umaru belonged to one of the cluster of patriclans all known by the name Yáám (with various distinguishing modifiers). During the nineteenth century, different sections of Yáám had swept into the northernmost area of Chambaland, establishing one large and numerous smaller chiefdoms (for details see Fardon 1988: 89-101). Stories relating how the most celebrated of the Yáám conquerors, 'Damashi' (Dàmàsí), met Moodibbo Adama (first Emir of Fombina) have been collected in numerous versions from the early colonial period onwards. Chamba raiders and Fulani state-builders commonly entered arrangements to their mutual advantage, and these were often cemented (at least in recollection) by the transference of a flag (as in the Donga/Bauchi alliance, and possibly in the Bali chiefdoms) or, as in Damashi's case, by the receipt of an Islamic text (ngitiiru) in return for a bow (*op. cit.* 96). A text purported to be that given by Moodibbo Adama to Damashi survived in the possession of the District Head of Tola in 1977 (and presumably does so still). Thanks to their chiefdom-building activities, the Yáám bũ (Chamba plural of Yáám), along with other chiefdom founders (like the Bata of Mbulo from whom Bisiwéérí was descended), were the dominant people in northern Shebshi communities on the eve of colonisation. Yáám and their close allies (Vere, Bata, Jangan) virtually monopolised the chiefships and other important offices of the chiefdoms, and they recognised a clear distinction between themselves and the Chamba-speaking people whom they considered indigenous to the area into which they had migrated (*op.cit.* 248-52). Although they took 'indigenous' women as wives, they preferred to marry their own daughters to allies whom they considered to be their equals. Bisiwéérí's marriage conforms to this pattern (since she was of Bata origin and her husband a Yáám). By the end of the nineteenth century, the chiefdoms of the northern Shebshi Mountains were loosely stratified, and (in local perception) ethnically plural units, albeit dialects of Chamba Daka were spoken by all the inhabitants. Colonisation intervened as the autonomy of these northern Chamba chiefdoms was coming under threat with increasing Fulani migration into the plains and an attempt by the Fulani to tighten the administration of the Adamawa Emirate. The "free Chamba", as early travellers described them, were largely confined to the hills.

German administration hardly became established in this remote part of Kamerun, before the colony was lost during World War I. The demarcation of the Anglo-German border had cut through the Adamawa Emirate and, in the area of concern here, had also divided the Yáám clansmen. On the British or Nigerian side, the significant Yáám chiefdom of Binyeri/Tola fell within an arc drawn around the Adamawa capital of Yola; on the German side of the frontier, where the Yáám chiefdoms around Pola had been separated from the Emirate capital, the Germans elevated the chief of the Fulani centre at Nassarawo to become the most important administrator of the northern Shebshi Mountains. Both British and German policy relied upon the co-operation of ruling families that could demonstrate some "traditional" claim to preeminence (however tortuously), and both promoted Fulani to administer non-Fulani, who were considered incapable of administering themselves. Within this broad conception, the outcome of colonial policy was highly pragmatic.

The British acquired part of the ex-German colony initially as occupied territory, and then under a League of Nations Mandate in 1922, and later a United Nations Trusteeship. At the outset, they were required to preserve existing administrative boundaries. This meant that the Yáám chiefdom at Binyeri/Tola remained subject to Yola, and the Yáám-būū around Pola continued to form part of Nassarawo District. When the District Head of Nassarawo became Emir of Yola in 1924, the opportunity was taken to place the Chamba districts under Yola. The Yáám chiefdoms were thus reunited within the Yola Emirate, although they remained in separate districts. The details of subsequent local colonial administration changed too often to enumerate fully here (see Fardon 1988, chapter 11); however, they are important to our present story because they left a residue of competing claims to preeminence based on appeals to various previous situations: to relations between Chamba and Fulani prior to colonisation, to the German settlement, and to any one of a number of British arrangements of indirect rule. This is the background against which Aliyu Umaru pursued his career.

Many of Bisíwéǵrí's songs refer to the official position occupied by her husband. During the British colonial period, a professional body of salaried administrators was taking shape. In the earlier years, these men were drawn solely from the Fulani. Two major initiatives were made to redress the balance: a reorganisation in 1938 created a Chamba Subordinate Native Authority. As an administrative measure, this amounted to little more than an exercise on paper. Because British officers virtually ceased touring during World War II, the Fulani District Head of Nassarawo remained for practical purposes the chief of the Chamba. However, the reform did lead to the introduction of a two-tier court system in Chambaland with a separate 'Alkaali's' court at Jada. Early reports on implementation suggest that cases concerning marriage, divorce or inheritance that involved either solely Muslims, or Muslims and 'pagans', were automatically referred to this court³. Two positions as "mufti", or assessor, were created for the Alkaali's court: one assessor was chosen to represent Leko-speaking Chamba living around Kojoli, and another was to represent Daka-speaking Chamba from the Pola region. Aliyu Umaru was entrusted with the latter position, which he held until his death in 1961⁴. Part of the mufti's role was to advise on the proper verdict in court cases after listening to interrogation of the plaintiff, accused, and witnesses by the presiding magistrate. He was particularly charged with interpreting local custom in cases where only one of the parties was Muslim. Additionally, he was responsible for tithing the rich to create a treasury (*baytal* in Fulfulde) to provide charity for the poor.

A second attempt at administrative reform occupied the entire decade of the 1950s and was in large part a reaction to increasing Chamba agitation against Fulani dominance. After numerous reports and enquiries (Fardon 1988:276-81; Fardon 1991:198-203), Nassarawo District was dismembered and its parts incorporated into a new Division with headquarters at Ganye. Jada became the headquarters of Jada District retaining a Fulani District Head. In fact, Fulani are numerous in Jada District, and the reports of the 1950s did not anticipate appointment of a Chamba to its headship. Nonetheless, members of the Yáám clans have continued to feel aggrieved that they are not recognised as paramounts in an area over which they believe they can claim rights of chiefship predating the colonial period.

Bisíwéǵrí's use of the title "mufti" for her husband is thus freighted with political implications for her listeners – whether during the colonial period or now. Not all the songs in which the title appears were necessarily composed after Aliyu Umaru's appointment as court assessor in Jada. Apparently, his prominent role in the local Muslim community had already earned him this honorific title, and he was often approached for advice.

Two other general features of the colonial period are reflected in the songs. Relative peacefulness (compared with the turbulence of the nineteenth century) allowed more people to travel securely in search of work or trade. Because Aliyu Umaru was often away from home, in pursuit of his regular employment at Jada or occasionally on trips to more distant markets,

Bisiwégéri was frequently left behind in the family compound at Faren. Apart from the imposition of a *Pax Britannica*, the period also witnessed widespread changes in religious affiliations. Most Chamba (including Muslims) insist that genuine conversion to world religions hardly occurred before the colonial period. There is another political consideration here, since the legitimacy of Fulani rule in Adamawa is closely identified with the nature of jihad, and with the number of conversions to Islam that occurred during the nineteenth century (see Fardon 1991, Chapter 9). Chamba tend to distinguish the outward signs adopted during the nineteenth century by their leaders who otherwise continued to practise Chamba religion, from genuine conversion involving renunciation of local religion, which they claim is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Aliyu Umaru was able to gain the office of assessor because he had embraced Islam, enjoyed local esteem and was to some (perhaps limited) extent literate. Bisiwégéri's songs repeatedly draw attention to the prestige she gained by marriage into a family at the forefront of change: from her husband's chiefly pedigree, the office he occupied and the increased wealth and range of contacts he enjoyed as a result. However, from another perspective (for instance, that of elements of the Chamba Christian population), Aliyu Umaru's position could be seen as part of the attempt to foist a Muslim, Fulani regime on Chamba who insisted (in the context of local administrative reform) that they had not been conquered during the jihad. A Chamba Muslim, working for the colonial administration, was bound to find himself caught between conflicting judgements.

Many of Bisiwégéri's songs focus on family life, particularly the marital relationship and the situation of co-wife, or the enduring quality of women's attachment to their parents and children rather than to their husbands. In nineteenth century Chambaland, and in some areas to this day, the strength of attachment to the matrilineal and patrilineal into which Chamba are born tended to pull against the marital bond. Women's first marriages were especially marked and involved negotiation between the future affinal relations. Many women entered into only one marriage but, if the first marriage did not last, subsequent marriages, which were marked by scant ceremony, might be very fragile. Women who married more than once might marry very often (see Fardon 1988 and 1993 for evidence). Relations with clanspeople represented a more permanent anchorage in life than marriage, and it is indicative that, among traditionalist Chamba, women are buried in the graveyards of their natal patrilineal and not at the place to which they move on marriage. Women's permanent identifications with their natal clans weighed against their attachment to their husbands. The polygynous household also was the scene of conflicting loyalties and ambitions; although friendship and solidarity among co-wives occur frequently, they are tempered by rivalry between women for their husband's attentions to themselves and their children. The bond between mothers and their children is represented as the closest of Chamba relations, and a poignancy is added to this relation by women's realisation that they would be expected to leave children old enough to manage apart from them with their husbands in the event of divorce.

The influence of world religions has tended to change this picture in some respects. Marriages seem to have become more stable during the second half of the twentieth century. The conjugal household has gained importance relative to the larger descent units. Traditional organisations like women's and men's cults (usually in the nominal ownership of clans) have generally receded in importance. An earlier system of partible inheritance is everywhere being replaced by rules that channel properties within the conjugal family. Wives of well-to-do Muslim men have become more secluded. (Bisiwégéri converted to Islam after her marriage; a woman in her position today would be unable to take the same part in communal dances.) Bisiwégéri's songs have to be set against this background of the changes in Chamba norms, many of which were already in potential conflict, and in the context of her marriage into a family at the leading edge of change in Chambaland from the nineteenth century onwards.

To appreciate Bisiwégéri's songs, we need to know not only such general circumstances

of time and place as those we have already described, and the relevant facts about her family situation, but also some facts about particular events. Sometimes she refers to these events in her own recorded comments; in other cases, Alhaji Saajo Aliyu has been able to clarify his mother's concerns. But in some cases, the circumstances which prompted the composition are unknown to us. In this, our position is very like that of local listeners, who will also need on occasions to infer the meanings of songs without knowing the circumstances which provoked them. In doing this, they will be guided by local conventions governing song composition: what singers may be expected to want to express and how they may use their language to do so. A listener thus interprets a song within a musical tradition with which he or she is familiar. The most popular songs may be suggestive of a common type of experience within the society, enabling the speaker to appropriate a particular message and, as an active participant in the transmission of his or her culture's musical tradition, to give it renewed expression on subsequent occasions.

Interpretation is an open-ended business, which can be carried to different lengths depending on the listener's knowledge of, and relation to, the singer on a given occasion. We would also argue for a purposive indeterminacy in the meaning of songs. Composers intend them to admit a variety of interpretations (or levels of interpretation), which they may themselves enlarge or restrict in the course of successive performances. We have therefore chosen to organise our presentation of these songs, not in terms of any one of their possible interpretations, but simply in terms of their primary expressive content, or theme: the main themes might be itemised as "regret at husband's absence" (most of songs 1 to 6) and "marital conflict" (7 to 12). The latter theme may be associated with ideas of women's solidarity with respect to men (8) or greater attachment to parents and children than to husband (11, 12). As we have noted above, Chamba norms describe a field of conflicting pressures operating between close kin and affines. Identities forged from ethnicity, religious affiliation, clanship, education, modernity and so forth are complex and often tense assemblages. Is a wife's intimation of regret at her husband's absence to be taken at face value or is it (also?/rather?) an implicit expression of pride at her marriage to a busy and important man? "Themes", as we refer to them here, are statements of explicit content, not of feelings or intentions. What a song "says" may not be what it "means" - either to the singer or to an audience who may interpret the explicit content allusively, metaphorically, ironically or otherwise. On occasions a song may "mean" the opposite of what it "says", and on different occasions and for different listeners it may mean different things⁵.

The songs

The first consequence of the appointment of Bìsíwẹ́rí's husband as mufti to the court in Jada, apart from increased prestige and income, was a change of residence. Rather than submitting his wife to travel and temporary accommodation, Aliyu Umaru preferred to leave her in charge of their old compound while he went to establish the family's new residence. This song dates from the period when she was left alone.

Song 1

- 1 dààdà Dī́jǎ làà jẹ
 mother Diija stay just

- ò wúk mè súún vèrén só
 I feel me husband happiness not

- ò gáám ì súún mè só

I talk with husband my not

- 2 míi sòkà /wéjé jé gà
child junior small just top.

m̀ mà lāān wūū tárwā
I fut. stay+inf. in_house entry_hut+q.

m̀ mà gīrēn ī nyá/árí
I fut. abstain+inf. loc. what+asp.

- 1 **Diija's mother leads an empty life.
I get no happiness from husband.
I do not converse with my husband.**
- 2 **Being just a young child,
must I sleep in the reception hut?
how will I spend my time of taboo?**

Notes (numbers refer to verses)

1 *Dààdà*: the Fulfulde term for mother is preferred; on this occasion, perhaps for its alliterative quality. However, Bisiwéjé consistently chooses Fulfulde alternatives to Chamba words, probably because the language of the Fulani connotes relative sophistication and an Islamic identity.

Dījā is her daughter's name.

wúk: verbs with mid tone in negative sentences (those ending in *só*) express current status. Verbs with high tone, as here, express definitiveness or habitual status.

2 *m̀ mà bīrēn* '(what) will I become?' or '(what) will become of me?' replaces *m̀ mà gīrēn* in some repetitions of this verse. It is nevertheless interesting that *b/g* correspondences are found in some words for different dialects.

The two verses of the song are complementary. The first line of each verse announces the human subject of the song: but in verse 1 stress is put on Bisiwéjé's status as mother and wife; verse 2 emphasises her youth. The particle *jé* occurs in the first line of verse 1 with the sense of 'empty, pointless or useless', establishing the mood of the song. The same particle in the opening line of verse 2 means simply 'only'. Being so young, she worries about her ability to assume such responsibility; as a woman, Bisiwéjé feels deprived of the pleasure and conversation her husband brought to her. The verb *làà* also occurs in both verses, first with the broader sense of existing under particular circumstances or in a particular place; then, in verse 2, with the more specific sense of lying (down to sleep). Even in verse 1, this verb may evoke for Chamba listeners both a state of being (alone, pointlessly, uselessly) and the idea of sleeping (alone). As a young woman, it is anomalous that Bisiwéjé should contemplate sleeping in the entrance and reception hut, the space preeminently associated with the male head of the compound. (In some traditional compounds, men might not have sleeping huts of their own; thus, sleeping huts tend to be associated with women.) The play on the idea of sleeping in the entrance hut might simply refer to her husband's absence. But there might also be a deeper play: women sleep in the entrance hut for three nights during the 'death crying' for a man. The consequences of absence may be seen

analogously with those of death; and songs similar to this one are sung during wakes by mourning women.

The reference to abstention (*gīt*, inf. *gīrēn*) in the final line of verse 2 could be interpreted in different ways. Abstentions of different types (dietary or sexual) apply at various times: sexual abstention is required during menstruation, for the postpartum period, and before men take part in activities like hunting or participating in cult rituals. Sexual abstention is also obligatory at the death of a husband before certain rituals have been performed. This supports the idea that Bisiwǵérí is using the genre of the 'cry death' song to bemoan her husband's absence.

In a related song, Bisiwǵérí worries whether her husband has been successful in his new post. Since she knows he has relatively little formal schooling, necessary for a properly "enlightened" court, she wonders whether he will be capable of meeting the challenge, and warns him against acting in "darkness".

Song 2

- 1 Ùmárù míí nyēnèn é jámá
Umaru child go_in mod. well+q.
- 2 én, fāādà pòk nàà vírká /só, bààbà Dījǵá wǵǵ
say court sit in darkness not, father Diija euph.

fāādà tūū pòk ì vírká /só, bààbà Sāājǵ wǵǵ
court owner sit with darkness not, father Saajo euph.

1. **Did Umaru's son begin well?**
2. **Everyone knows a court cannot sit in darkness, Diija's father.
The officials of the court cannot be in darkness, Saajo's father.**

Notes

1 *Nyàá-Sāā-Múù* (= *Nyàá-Sāā-Nwúù*), a generic name given to wives of Yáám clansmen, sometimes replaces the name of Aliyu's father, Umaru.
The Fulfulde, *jám*, is preferred to its Chamba synonym.

2 *fāādà*: the Hausa term (borrowed into Fulfulde) for a king's court is used to refer to the Koranic court at Jada.

The Fulfulde term for 'father' is preferred to the Chamba term.

Bisiwǵérí's preference for Fulfulde terms is apparent in this song also; she may have felt that such show of sophistication was commensurate with her husband's position as a functionary of a Muslim and Fulani court. If all goes well with this job, she knows her husband's financial standing will be considerably improved. In another song, she asks for a gift as a sign that she also will benefit from his new standing.

Song 3

- 1 Ùmárù míí gāàn líí bāytàl é wàà gà

Umaru child get eat treasury mod. with since

- 2 kú nyáá àdííkò dọ́gúwá tẹ̀ẹ̀ sá, m̀ fákì
he give+inj. scarf long here no?, I beg+asp.

kú nyáá àdííkò dọ́gúwá bààrá, n̄ sāràrì
he give+inj. scarf long two, I say+you+asp.

- 1 **Since Umaru's son has taken over use of the treasury,**
2 **ought he not give me a long scarf, I beg of you?**
he ought to give me two long scarves, I tell you.

Notes

- 1 Again *Nyàá sãa múù wéé* 'Nyaa-Saa-Muu's child' can replace *Úmárù míí*.
The verb *líí* is replaced by *nyáá* 'give', *téé* 'take', or *kèè* 'him' (*gààn kèè* 'got (something) for himself').
é wàà gà is sometimes *-àánī* 'that (treasury)'.
bāytāl is the Fulfulde word for 'court treasury', which was placed under the control of the assessor.

- 2 *mùftí wā* ('mufti' with euphonic extension) is often used instead of *m̀ fákì*.
àdííkò dọ́gúwá: Hausa for a long head scarf. The purchase would have been made from a Hausa trader.

In the next song, *Bísíwéérí* seems to have placed a real event in a special light, as we shall see below.

Song 4

- 1 n̄ kpáá n̄ jààm ì Màànyīnè mūm gà
I cry I stand with Mayo-Ini mouth when

Bísíwéérí gèr é dàà jì Màànyīnè mūm
Bísíwéérí go mod. down with Mayo-Ini mouth

a1) Bísíwéérí súún nwòsùmēní, n̄ gèt bọ́
Bísíwéérí husband hurt+me+foc.+asp., I go top.

a2) téém kōóm só wá
heart come not euph.

díng kōóm só sáng gà
leg come not again since

- 2 ì tùn ì yā̀sùn ká wókí
 you_(pl.)+imp. carry you_(pl.)+inj. cross+caus.+me imp. water

 ì tùn ì yā̀sùn Dūnū̀ gàà sè
 you_(pl.) carry you_(pl.) cross+caus.+me Dūnū̀ other_side first

 gà tùn yā̀sá ká wók /gàà gà
 so carry cross+caus.+us imp. water other_side first when
- 3 súún mè bé/é Yṑlà kààmí
 husband my at Yola town+asp.

1 **Since I stand and lament on the bank of the Mayo Ini,
 Bìsíwẹ̀rì went down to the bank of the Mayo Ini.**

a1) **Bìsíwẹ̀rì's husband is the one who has done me ill. When I walk,**

a2) **I have not the courage.
 Since my legs no longer carry me,**

2 **take me and carry me across the river.
 Take me and carry me to the other side of the Dūnū̀.
 For [someone] must take us to the other side,**

3 **My husband is away in Yola town.**

Notes

1 Verse 1 can be changed to the form marked a1)-a2).
 The text, "Bìsíwẹ̀rì's husband is the one who has done me ill", may well represent the words of the boat owner involved in the altercation (see below).

2 Dūnū̀ (Chamba) and Mà̀nyī̀nè (Maayo Ini in Fulfulde) are used here to refer to the same river, the first as it passes through Ganye, the second further downstream towards Yola.

Bìsíwẹ̀rì's commentary on this song suggests that she has adapted her version of events to evoke abandonment:

Gèr ì Yṑlà. Í báá só. Í tùn kpàáng gùsí. Gàán wók /bé
 go with Yola. They come not. They carry groundnut rainy_season. so+dem. water mod.

wàà tūnēn kímíáng kímíáng dàà. Gbẹ̀rèn í báá làáng só. Í làà
 with come_out+inf. ideo. ideo. down. End_of_season they come quickly not. They stay

rī Yṑlà deèn háá. Í nàk āsāwẹ̀rẹ̀ bààrá gò. Kùn nímò.
 loc. Yola that long. They make week two asp. Fact+I sing+fact.

He went to Yola. They did not come back. They were carrying fresh groundnuts. But

the river was overflowing. Towards the end of the rainy season, they could not travel quickly. They stayed for a long time there in Yola. They spent two weeks. So I sang this song.

Bìsíwẹ́rì's family tell a slightly different and more complicated story. Her husband did in fact make a business trip to Yola, but he took his wives with him along with two donkeys. At the Mayo Ini ford, where they were crossing by canoe, an altercation occurred between Aliyu and the canoe owner, who had ordered him in discourteous fashion to do the bailing. A fight ensued, which ended when Aliyu snatched the punting pole and hurled it away into the river, leaving the canoe to drift dangerously. Other canoes immediately came to their aid, but the rescuers sided against him and refused to transport him, his wives, or their baggage. Aliyu went alone upstream and found a place where he could ford the river by swimming. From the other side of the river he returned to the crossing place to make new arrangements for his wives and possessions to be brought across.

A listener unacquainted with this story will assume the song to be that of a woman left behind by her husband, separated from him by a river, and fearful of following after him, despite a desire to do so. She therefore implores others to come to help her on her journey. Bìsíwẹ́rì's simplified story suggests that she preferred this generalised interpretation (and may have composed her song with it in mind). While verse a1-2) may be a reference to the events members of her family believe to have provided the inspiration for the song, it can also be interpreted as a slightly enigmatic reference to the emotions of the singer herself. Such ambiguities are common in Bìsíwẹ́rì's songs and may add to their charm for listeners.

In a related vein, the next song deals with her husband's trip to market – in order to buy a horse, according to her family. Literally, it suggests that Bìsíwẹ́rì is fearlessly proposing to take the initiative of going to seek him out. However, given that her intention to journey is presumably rhetorical, the song could also be interpreted as an advertisement for her well-travelled husband who is countenancing so expensive and prestigious a purchase as a horse.

Song 5

1 m̀ báá gērēní, dōn gà ñ nyéén mòò Yáám míí mùftí tètè
I come go+inf+asp., other top. I see at _last Yaam child mufti there

m̀ báá gērēní, dōn gà ñ sààm Wéyàà súún é tètè, gíi
I come go+inf.+asp., other top. I find Weya husband mod. there, dem.

m̀ báá gērēní, dōn gà m̀ bānkèn ì Yáám míí tètè sógà
I come go+inf.+asp., other top. I meet with Yaam child there rather

2 lūūmò Mōq̄bì líí mó dōn wāā
market Mubi eat day other euph.

1 **I am about to go, perhaps I will finally see the court assessor from the Yaam patriclan there.**

I am about to go, perhaps I will see Weya's husband there!

I am about to go, perhaps I will meet the man of the Yaam patriclan there.

2 **Mubi market day has come again.**

Notes

- 2 *Lūūmò*, market, is Fulfulde. There is no Chamba equivalent.
Mōqōbì (Mubi) is sometimes replaced by *Gíré* (Girei), another market town.

'The assessor', 'Wéyàà's husband', 'the man of the Yáám patriclan' are all references to her husband. Bìsíwééří did not have a strong singing voice but Wéyàà did; that is why she was often the first to perform Bìsíwééří's songs in public.

To end her song, Bìsíwééří sings the first part of the verse, replacing the final *tèè* 'there' with the perfective modal particle *gò*, changing the meaning to 'I shall *certainly* see ...'.

Bìsíwééří's family say that, when she composed this song, a trip to Mubi could last two to three months and was a dangerous matter, as captives were still being taken. They think Aliyu was among the first in the region to venture there.

In the preceding songs, Bìsíwééří seems to represent the absence of her husband as a serious matter, involving the conflicting emotions of regret and pride. She was also capable of treating absence in a lighter vein. In the next song, she again proposes to follow her husband, but more to poke fun at him than to satisfy a longing to see him.

Song 6

- 1 Tòlà yàà sè
 Tola compound first

 Tòlà kààm é gòórè
 Tola village mod. where+?
- 2 mākùm Dūtāl yàà sè
 show+me Dutal compound first

 ñ kèè súún mè mùftí
 I seek husband my mufti
- 3 ñ kèè bānggāārù làà ré nyēm dúmá wá
 I seek butcher sleep mod. home vulture euph.
- 1 **A Tola compound in particular,
 where is Tola town?**
- 2 **Show me Dutal's compound,
 I'm looking for my husband, the judicial assessor.**
- 3 **I'm looking for the butcher who lives at the vulture's house.**

Notes

- 1 *jààm* 'stand' is sometimes substituted for *kààm* in the second form of this verse. The result means literally, 'where does Tola stand?'

2 *n̄ gèr i* 'I go to' is sometimes substituted for *n̄ kèè*; thus, 'I am going to my husband'.

3 This verse, which is translated with a relative clause, is actually a sequence of two propositions in Chamba: 'I'm seeking the butcher (Fulfulde, *banngaaro*); he lives ...'

As she explains herself,

Gāmsi nwúù, gèt Tòlà, làà ... Tòlà dōn pèè bà lí jé. Í báá só. Í
Court wife, go Tola, stay ... Tola other return and eat just. They come not. They

nóó: làà á nyēm mànàà kèè. Gāmsi Làámjáà míí, mènén /mà tē tēñ. Kùn
say: stay mod. home friend his. Court Lamja child, anaphore fut. certainly take. Fact.+I

sárò ré: dúmá yàà déèn é gòó gà, m̄ máá gá nyēm.
say+fact. that: vulture compound that mod. where since, I go imp. home.

He went courting a wife in Tola and stayed there... Tola market day came with no news. They did not come back. People said he was staying at his friend's house. He was courting a Lamja girl and the rotter wanted to marry her. So I said, 'Where is that vulture's house? I must go there.'

It turns out that her husband's friend was named Duta, the Fulfulde term for 'carrion bird, vulture', and at the same time, was a butcher by profession. So she drew the evident conclusion that in Tola there was a butcher living at a vulture's house. Tola is the Yáám-ruled chiefdom founded by Damashi that became administratively separated from the other Yáám chiefdoms by the demarcation of the Anglo-German boundary (as explained in our introductory background notes). Lamja are a distinct Daka-speaking people considered indigenous to the northern Shebshi mountains and therefore somewhat inferior (at least in Bisiwéérí's eyes) to her own Bata pedigree or to her husband's illustrious ancestry. Bisiwéérí's wit is at its keenest here as she sweeps references to meat and carrion, chiefly and non-chiefly peoples, scavenging and butchery into a play of mutual allusions around the topic of her husband's proposed marriage. The effect is to portray her husband's temporary abode, as well as his trip and its purpose, in a simultaneously humorous and derogatory light.

Bisiwéérí was well able to stand up for herself in disputes with her husband, as she shows in the following three songs. In the first she upbraids her husband for his behaviour; in the second she defends a co-wife; and in the third she asserts her own standing within the polygynous household.

Song 7

1 jàng pèsirì, gíí, Bisiwéérí, kèè Sú/ú ré tètè
throw propriety+asp. dem, Bisiwéérí, pres. God mod. there

2 nēē sīkà bēē mót pè
person insult+freq.+us mod.+with day also

í sīkùm bēē mót pè

they insult+freq.+me mod.+with day also

- 3 m̀ bĩtsà míí Yààya wẹ̀ẹ̀rè
I change+you child Yaaya your+q.
- m̀ bĩtsà nyàá Dījǎ wẹ̀ẹ̀rá
I change+caus.+you mother Diija your+q.
- m̀ mà míí wẹ̀ẹ̀ Sāājó bīrēná
I fut. child your Saajo become+inf.+q.

- 1 **He has thrown propriety away! Bìsíwẹ̀ẹ̀rí, surely God is there [to see].**
- 2 **Someone insults us every day.**
 I am insulted every day.
- 3 **Am I to replace your child Yaaya?**
 Am I to replace your daughter Diija?
 Am I to become your child Saajo?

- 1 *Bìsíwẹ̀ẹ̀rí* is sometimes replaced by *bàá mírí*, literally 'my father's child'.

2 Note the stylistic device: singular subject and plural object in one form; plural subject and singular object in the other. This is likely to express ambiguity in the position of her co-wives.

3 She cites the names of her two sons and her daughter. Note that the boys are 'your child' while the girl is 'Mother Diija', named by "title" as if she were already an older woman who had already exercised her reproductive function (compare song 9 below).

We do not know the particular circumstances that Bìsíwẹ̀ẹ̀rí rails against in this song, but her next song is in defence of one of her co-wives.

Song 8

- 1 kẹ̀ẹ̀ nyá/á wōōn ì vwārkán /nyángán jẹ̀ gà, ñ wōō mè só
pres. what like+inf. with beat+freq.+us+inf. useless just when, I like me not
- kẹ̀ẹ̀ nyá/á wōōn ì yáálénè, yáálén gà, ñ káá tēē
pres. what like+inf. with upbraiding+q., upbraiding top., I refuse still
- 2 pàná súún mè mùftí, nè yérèn wōōn gà, tóómí
please husband my mufti, person foreign like+inf. top., work
- úsèní súún mè mùftí, nè yérèn yàà gà, tóómí
please husband my mufti, person foreign compound top., work

1 **What kind of love is this with useless beatings for us? I want none of it.
What kind of love is this with such upbraidings? I will have none of such things.**

2 **Please my husband, the court assessor, to treat (your wives) as a savage would, what a chore!**

Please my husband, the court assessor, to run your home as a savage would, what a chore!

Bìsíwẹ́ẹ́rì explains,

Àán déèn máá, í vwāt nòk só. Mándūnì mè dá/án wàà, gāmsì súún éēn. Bāki
dem. dem. top., they beat me not. Co-wife my that top., court husband asp. Break+freq.

tómá /dèmséná kàánì, tǎpkì òm wùù. Báá gà, mà tē vwātkòōn.
whip long thus put+freq. back house. Come when, fut. still beat+her+inf.

In this song, the beating was not for me, it was for my co-wife. She was having an "affaire". He cut off several long switches and put them behind the house. When she arrived, he planned to whip her.

Although she might support her co-wives against her husband, Bìsíwẹ́ẹ́rì was highly attentive to her status among them within the polygynous household. In the following song, she complains of being assigned the task of 'answering the door'. She likens it to drawing water for horses, which would normally be done by a servant, a captive, or a small child.

Song 9

1 nyàá Gāārú míí gààn dīngì "báá tẹ̀ẹ̀"
mother Gaaru child receive answer "come here"

nyàá Gāārú míí pòk tīkì "báá tẹ̀ẹ̀"
mother Gaaru child sit wait "[someone has] come here"

2 sāt nè tírèn dōn nyēm jẹ
say person head other home just

3 bààbà Dījā, wī m̄ mà wōōn éēn, ò kópsí nyāān wókā
father Diija, you you fut. want+inf. asp., I draw+inj. horse water+q.
m̄ vīsà á tēē, kàà nòk dá/án gà, ò kópsí nyāān wókā
I ask+you mod. still, like me that top., I draw+inj. horse water+q.

1 **Gaaru's daughter is answering the door.
Gaaru's daughter waits at every stranger's beck and call.**

- 2 **She just relays messages to some headman inside.**
- 3 **Diija's father, would you like me to draw water for the horses next?**
I am asking you, someone like myself, should I be drawing water for horses?

Notes

3 'someone like myself': Bisiwẹ́rì is referring to the fact that she was taken as wife from a clan of high standing. She is not a worthless person and will not be ordered about as one.

The following song also involves marital dissension. Displeased at having been assigned a sleeping hut with no shutter for its entry, Bisiwẹ́rì likens her position to that of the caddis – the larva of a may-fly – that is encased in a silken case covered with bits of debris that it carries around with its head protruding.

Song 10

- 1 Kàmbé mí kàà kànyìim wá
Kambe child like caddis euph.
- 2 mènén /bānggāārù wōòm só sáng bọ́
someone butcher love+me not again top.
- 3 m̄ fāwnì m̄ bākì n̄ lēngsì mìn é bīn gú gá
I dress-up I break I lay shoulder mod. front him when
- m̄ fāwnì m̄ bākì n̄ lēngsì tím ī tí/í jẹ
I dress-up I break I lay tree at head just
- 1 **Kambe's daughter is like a caddis.**
- 2 **Since that butcher So-and-so doesn't love me any more,**
- 3 **when I dress myself up and move my head from side to side before him,**
I dress myself up, break off twigs, and lay them across my head.

Notes

2 Fulfulde *banngaaro* 'butcher' is used as a term of insult for her husband (in some repetitions, she replaces *mènén* with *súún mè* 'my husband').

3 In the two versions of this verse, Bisiwẹ́rì compares her position to that of the caddis larva cocooned in its casing and covered in twigs and debris. In the first version she suggests the movement of her head as she emerges from her hut to appear before her husband; in the second, she points to the poor state of her dwelling, which only has branches for a door. However, in the absence of any reference to a hut in the song, a listener unacquainted with the immediate circumstances that impelled her to compose it might also understand her to allude to

a seductive side-to-side movement of the head. The use of the Fulfulde verb, *fawnaago*, to dress up, encourages this sense.

Note the use of the subordinating particle *gà* 'when, since', which establishes a loop in the song whereby verse 3 is dependent on the next repetition of verse 1.

Chamba women's first marriages are not made at the whim of the partners; they imply family alliances and require the participation of the future affines in the arrangements. In the event of marital dissension that threatens the continuation of her marriage, a Chamba woman may turn back to her own family - either to reproach them for having assented to the unhappy union, or to seek their help and support. So in the following song, Bisiwëëri appeals to her matrikin, accusing her mother of having taken the bridewealth paid for her daughter as if she were selling a captive. At the same time, she appeals for help from her grandmother (Mangla, the ethnic name of the people living on the hill above Mbulo) and her maternal uncle (Yeriima, the title 'prince' in Fulfulde). (She does not comment on the immediate circumstances that made her compose this song.)

Song 11

- 1 mǎnǎā í lēbà á tēē
people they sell+you mod. still

n̄ lēm̄m tēē
you sell+me still
 - 2 kāká Mánglá ī Būūlò, bāā vëë sè, ñ dāt tiri
grandmother Mangla loc. Mbulo, come+imp. you+mod. first, I miss problem

à vīt Yèríimà ī Būūlò, bāā vëë sè, ñ dāt tiri
you+imp. call Yerima loc. Mbulo, come+imp. you+mod. first, I miss problem
 - 3 nyáá mè gǎàn bày gǎ, tǎmm̄m bée sári
mother my receive cowrie when, put+me mod.+with trouble

nyáá mè gǎàn bày gǎ, tǎmm̄m sāt /jūm mè
mother my receive cowrie when, put+me trouble on me
- 1 **People sell you all the same.
You sold me all the same.**
 - 2 **Grandma Mangla in Mbulo, come right away, I'm in trouble.
Call Yeriima in Mbulo, come right away, I'm in trouble.**
 - 3 **When my mother took the [bridewealth] cowries, she put me in trouble.
When my mother took the [bridewealth] cowries, she landed me in trouble.**

A woman's children are her other mainstay in the midst of marital discord. But to remain with her children she must choose not to sever her marriage. For on divorce, she would return to

her natal family alone. In her next song, Bìsíwẹ́ẹ́rí weighs the unhappiness of her marriage against her love for her children.

Song 12

1 Bìsíwẹ́ẹ́rí wōōn gà, míí Yààya
Bìsíwẹ́ẹ́rí love+inf. when, child Yaaya

2 ò nyíí nè dōn bīn gà, gí.
I know person other front when, dem.

ò kẹẹ nyíín mūm, ò kẹẹ dōn nyíín sáí
I seek now mouth, I seek other now speech

1 **Bìsíwẹ́ẹ́rí's only love is her child Yaaya.**

2 **If later I meet someone else, so be it.
For now, I am looking for conflict, for now I am causing trouble for someone.**

Notes

2 The use of *dōn* (rather than *nè dōn* 'another person') in the final proposition of this verse is grammatically unusual.

The final verse may well reproduce the reproaches that are being addressed to her by her husband.

Bìsíwẹ́ẹ́rí explains,

pén déen nàkēn ò nīm àán wàā, í nóó: súún wōòm só gà,
thing dem. do+foc. I sing+rel. dem. top., they say: husband love+me not when,

ò làà nyēm gó/ón kpàkè. N làà ò kẹẹ nyá/àré gà, ò nóó:
I stay home him uselessly+q. I stay I seek what+q when, I say:

ò bàk mè mírí, só ò wōō mè súún só.
I follow me child, not I want me husband not.

What made me sing this song was that people were saying that since my husband doesn't care for me, is there any sense in staying in his home? As to what I was looking for by staying, I said I was staying for the sake of my child, not because I loved my husband.

While she clings to her children, constant worry over them is part of a mother's lot; witness the next song.

Song 13

- 1 d̀urí nàà s̀omsì m̀or á b̀en
rain fall choose day mod. down

Kàmbé mírí, m̀ báá tím nìp t̀ānēnà
Kambe child, I come tree sap chew+inf.+q.

- 2 Gāārú míí mà tím má/án k̀osé/énà
Gaaru child fut. tree which pluck+inf.+q.

báa Gāājé míí mà tím má/án t̀ānēnà
father Gaaje child fut. tree which eat+inf.+q.

Kàmbé míí k̀osì mà tím má/án kpāĺé/én
Kambe child pluck fut. tree which taste+inf.+q.

- 3 k̀un k̀éérò méémbūrè
fact+I seek+fact. child+pl.+?

- 1 **Rain only falls from time to time.**
Will I, Kambe's daughter, end up chewing the sap from wood?
- 2 **From what tree['s fruit] can Gaaru's daughter pluck?**
From what tree['s fruit] can Gaaje's niece chew?
From what tree['s fruit] can Kambe's daughter pluck and savour?
- 3 **To get [something] for my children?**

Notes

- 1 *s̀omsì* can be replaced by *gāākì* 'count', and *m̀or á* by *b̀um* 'place'.
- 2 Bìsíwẹ́rì invokes her mother (Gaaru), her father's youngest brother (Gaaje, from the Fulfulde *gaaji*, youngest child), and her father (Kambe).
In verses 1 and 2, the interrogative suffix is unusually *-à* rather than *-á* (or *-è* as in verse 3).

- 3 *k̀éérò* can be replaced by *nyáárò* 'give+fact.'.

Of this song, Bìsíwẹ́rì says:

D̀urí nàà r̄ j̀èè déen só, s̀ùumlí jààm háá, s̀ú/bánén t̀arā,
rain fall loc. year dem. not, short-dry-season stand long, moon three,

k̀un nímò ńóó: d̀urí nàà só gà, yírí nwààn só gà,
fact.+I sing+fact. say: rain fall not since, guinea-corn bear not since,

m̀ mà méembū nyá/á nyāānè
I fut. child+pl. what give+inf.+q.

The rains did not come that year, the break in the rains went on and on for three months, so I sang, since the rain will not fall, and the guinea corn will not grow, what will I give my children?

In the following simple and expressive song, Bìsíwéḗrí asks God to grant her continued life so that her children will not be deprived of her care.

Song 14

1 m̀ mà lāān gà, é, nūddí Sùū
I fut. lie+inf. when, that, trust+imp. God

2 b̀m kú dāk̀m nàà gòngsí pè
place it+inj. be_light+me in breath also

Sú/ú kú vēr̀mè rì Sāājó pè
God inj. leave+me with Saajo also

3 m̀ báá lāān kàán sīn
I come lie+inf. thus just

1 **When I go to sleep, I think, Trust in God.**

2 **May the dawning day find me alive.
May God let me stay with Saajo.**

3 **That is how I go to sleep.**

Notes

1 Bìsíwéḗrí uses *nūddi* rather than the longer form of Fulfulde derived verb *nuddina* 'trust in', from *nuuda* 'to be true, right'.

2 Sometimes the name of her daughter, Diija, replaces that of her son, Saajo.

Bìsíwéḗrí became a Muslim after her marriage. Among her songs, one is concerned primarily with religion and was composed, according to her family, when she was planning to convert.

Song 15

1 Kàmbé m̀í wòò Māk̀kà nyēēnēní
Kambe child want Mecca see+inf.+asp.

- 2 Bìsì Màà-Mbūlò, á gèt Sú/ú wá/á gūrēn tètè
Bisi Mayo-Mbulo, we go God hand seize+inf. there
- 3 à bōksá tē Yààya wàà
you+imp. follow+freq.+us still Yaaya with
- á mà gērēn ì míí Yààya pè
we fut. go+inf. with child Yaaya also
- 1 **Kambe's daughter wants to see Mecca.**
- 2 **Bìsì from the River Mbulo, we are going to pay homage to God**
- 3 **Follow me along Yaaya.**
Young Yaaya and I will go together.

Notes

1 Bìsì Màà-Mbūlò combines the first part of her own name with the name of the river near her home town of Mbulo (Maayo Mbulo in Fulfulde). We have three different explanations for the sense of *bìsì*, the first part of her name (including the suggestion that the name is specific to women of Bata ancestry); the second part of her name, *wéǵérí*, means 'child'.

Commentators from her family add that in 1977 she was offered the opportunity to make the haj with her son Yaaya. She refused the offer on the grounds that her age and frailty meant that Yaaya would have spent all his time looking after her rather than attending to his religious duties. The pilgrimage was made by Yaaya's sister instead.

The songs presented thus far have been lyrical: the composer appears to be expressing her intimate feelings to people close to her. In other songs, Bìsìwéǵérí's pungent critical sense seems to be addressed to a wider audience. While her lyrical songs also contain satirising materials (as in the songs protesting her lodging or poking fun at her husband's efforts to court a new wife), the songs that complete this collection reveal her at her most editorial. In the next song, she jibes any of her jealous rivals who might claim her husband is too good for her.

Song 16

- 1 màý jábbà tūū làà wūū, ñ nyēnkù jé
owner robe owner stay in_room, I see+him simply
- màý jábbà tūū nàà sāā-gāā, rí nyēnkùrè
owner robe owner in bird-egg they see+him+q.
- 2 ì báá gà, súún mè dá/án gà
they+inj. come when, husband my that top.
- ñ dóóm súún mè mùftí
I greet husband my assessor

- 3 nè-nwùù dōn bŭ í wòòrè
person-wife other pl. they want+q.
- 1 **The man in the jabba is in his room, I have only caught a glimpse of him.
The man in the jabba is doing his paperwork, have they seen him?**
- 2 **Let them come, as for that husband of mine,
I greet my husband, the mufti.**
- 3 **Do other women want him?**

We know Bìsíwẹ̀rì's general intention from her remarks cited below. Her first verse remains, nonetheless, grammatically and semantically obscure to us. "The man with the jabba robe" (Hausa *màì jabba*; the Chamba *tūū* is redundant with *mày*) is apparently her husband. We assume her to mean that he is so taken up with his court work that she sees little of him. She is therefore not so fortunate as other women may think.

She comments,

géēn bọ́q, á ī Fārēn àán wàá, né-nwùù bàán ī Fārēn àán,
this top., we loc. Faren dem. when, woman pl.+dem. loc. Faren rel.

í nóó: wóórá nyāngsèn é wàà súún sèmén, wóórá vẹ̀ēmèn
they say: we spoil mod. with husband handsome, we be_ugly

kàà nyéē, kùn sárò, í nóó: mǎà bọ́q, kú báárèèn,
as what, fact.+I said+fact, I say: who top., he come+inj.,

í wòò súún sèmén dá/ànì gà, ì báá rì tẹ̀ẹ̀
they want husband handsome that when, they+inj. come they+inj. take

That time, we were in Faren, and the women in Faren were saying that a handsome husband was wasted on us, that we were as ugly as anything. So I said, let anyone who wants that handsome husband come and marry him.

What happens when rivals pursue the suggestion of marrying her husband is the subject of the next song.

Song 17

1 m̄ vī̀sì é tēē, súún sèmén gà, dùk gé/én sī̀nè
I ask mod. still, husband handsome top., remain it only+q.

n̄ lāā lá/ám só, pàná, súún sèmén yàà rè nyēm sī̀ná
I sleep sleep not, please, husband handsome compound loc. home only+q.

bùm gāmkèn jẹ, kàà súún sèmén gà, dùk gó/ón sīn gbàt
place resound simply, like husband handsome top., remain him only just

lá/ám tùk gūrùm sá, súún sèmén gà, dùk gó/ón sīn gbàrè
sleep eye catch+me not?, husband handsome top, remain him only just+q.

- 2 gāmkèn é nyèè, Ùmárù míí Wààsá
resound how+q., Umaru child Waasa

bùm sākèn jẹ, mùftí wāā, Ùmárù míí Wààsá
place be-noisy simply, assessor euph., Umaru child Waasa

- 1 **Now I ask you, are there no more handsome husbands (to be found)?
Please, I can't sleep, is this the only handsome husband's compound?
There is such a din, there are no more handsome husbands around, then!
I can't get to sleep, are there really no more handsome husbands around?**

- 2 **Why is it so noisy, Waasa son of Umaru?
The place is in commotion, court assessor, Waasa son of Umaru.**

Notes

- 2 Wààsá is said to be the Hausa *wàsa* 'game, play', which was given as a surname both to Umaru and to his son.

The women were apparently so anxious to become Aliyu's next wife that they were fighting among themselves over him. In Bìsíwẹ́rì's words,

Í kāmèn í nòng dàà lóng míí, kùn nimbúrò ò nòó: í mà nōngēn
They meet they fight down gulley child, fact.+I sing+them+fact. I say: they fut. fight+inf.

gà, súún sèmén gà, dùk mòṣṣn gí sīn gbàrè
when, husband handsome top., remain really it only just+q.

They met and fought down in the gulley, so I sang to them saying, since they were going to fight over the matter, did that really mean there were no handsome husbands left?

The preceding songs suggest that Bìsíwẹ́rì considered other women's envy of her position as mere silliness. But their jealousy could be sufficiently strong to wish her harm. In this case, Bìsíwẹ́rì entrusts her fate to God.

Song 18

- 1 nè dōnbū í nākùm wẹ́/ẹ́ dòwà
person other+pl. they make+me death prayer

m̀ pòk gà, í nyáá wẹ/ẹ̀ m̀m̀ jẹ̀ wá
I sit when they give death mouth just euph.

2 ì tẹ̀ẹ̀ pọ̀psí tẹ̀ẹ̀, wẹ/ẹ̀ mót mè sīn só
they+inj. take beg there, death day my be-full not

3 à Sù/ù gà, nyíí s̄āyì mèrì
so God top. know time my+asp.

1 **Some people are saying prayers for my death.
I am still alive, yet they are giving out word of my death.**

2 **Let them make their entreaties, the day of my death is not yet due.**

3 **For only God knows when my time will come.**

Notes

1 *dòwà* is from Fulfulde *do'a* 'prayer' ; it contrasts with the Chamba verb *póp*, *pōpsi*, in verse 2 which has implications of non-Islamic practice in this context.

3 *s̄āyì* is from the Hausa *sa'i* 'time' (taken into Fulfulde).

The next song also involves evil intentions, probably manifested in the form of witchcraft, since Bisiwẹ́ẹ́rí refers to accusations that were no longer allowed in court under the British colonial regime. It would seem that Bisiwẹ́ẹ́rí considered someone under accusation of evil-doing by witchcraft to be guilty, but could not make her evidence public, as she and the accusers could then all be charged with an offense against colonial law.

Song 19

1 Kàmbé míí làr é tēē, é, jàmāānù móón /só
Kambe child fear mod. still, that time past not

2 Nèsáára wák wọ́dà tẹ̀ẹ̀, sóbàán kùn yẹ̀ẹ̀wtìrì
European strike order there rather+dem. cont.+I speak+asp.

1 **Kambe's daughter is quite afraid, she knows the present times are not as in the past.**

2 **The Europeans have made a law, otherwise I would speak out.**

Notes

1 *jàmāānù* 'time' is Fulfulde, but we sometimes hear a final *-i* as in the Hausa *zàmanì*, both being originally from Arabic.

é, *jàmāānù* is replaced in the last repetition of this verse by *tít wọ̀qè* 'our matter', in

this case meaning 'our justice'.

2 *Nèsáárá* is from the Fulfulde *Nasaaraajo*; *yeewtugo* 'converse' is also Fulfulde. But *wóqúdà* is English 'order'. *Wák wóqúdà* is sometimes replaced by *nyáá* (or *táp*) *dòóká* 'give (put) a law', using the Hausa *dòka* for 'law'.

Even in her old age, Bìsíwéérí did not divulge the specific details of the affair that prompted her song. The only explanation she would give was,

Í fākùṃ lǎà fāk gà, ñ nyíí tít déèn gò. Gà nè déèn
They beg+me tongue beg when, I know matter dem. asp. Since person that

sóon sóon sēnì gò gà, ñ nóó: ñ lát mè sārī.
deny deny be_difficult asp., when, I say: I fear me trouble.

They were asking me how I came to know what I said, and I knew all about it. But since the person concerned was denying everything, I said I was afraid of getting into trouble.

Bìsíwéérí's "editorial" songs often comment on the lighter aspects of the social and economic changes of her times; in the next song she has a word to say on new habits of dress.

Song 20

1 nèe bày wàà só lép só, sẹ́ẹ̀ muftí
person cowry with not buy not only mufti

2 yísí kààkí gèr é/é Yōōlā
cloth khaki come mod.+loc. Yola

1 **A person with no money cannot buy (anything), but the court assessor can.**

2 **Khaki cloth has arrived from Yola.**

Notes

1 *Sààm* 'get, find' may replace *lép*. Bìsíwéérí sometimes also changes this statement to a question, by using *gòrè* 'perfective+interrogative' instead of the negative *só* (can someone without money buy [anything]?).

2 *Sāāgò* is sometimes used instead of Yola.

Here is her explanation:

Kààkībū déèn móon/én sẹ́ẹ̀ nóó: kàày, yísí sèmén só, kàán só.
Khaki+pl. dem. before only say: ah! cloth good not, thus not.

Í bée fíde/én mān ī Sāāgò wāà, Pùllibàán à tẹ̀ẹ̀ àn máárò
 They mod.+with begin+inf. go+inf. loc. Saago asp., Fulani+pl.+dem. loc. there dem. go

ī Sāāgò, í lép jómpà míí déen é/én ì gí. Gà n jāng jūm áan gà,
 loc. Saago, they buy jumper small that+asp. with dem. When they throw on dem. when,

káà, káà, kẹ̀ẹ̀ sát /só.
 ah! ah! pres. speech not.

People used to say that khaki cloth was no good. When they started to go to Saago, as soon as the Fulani who were around there came, people bought those little tunics from them. When they tried them on, they said, hm! not so bad!

According to Bìsíwẹ̀ẹ̀rí's family, the reference to her husband (the *mùftí* of verse 1) reflects the fact that he was one of the first to buy the new khaki cloth at market and bring it back to Chambaland. Clothing fashion also figures in the next song, which would however be hermetic to all those who did not know exactly what it refers to.

Song 21

1 Ûsmánù Jiddà bẹ̀wẹ̀ẹ̀ kẹ̀ẹ̀ lép bēnì kááyá dōn bēn
 Usmanu Jidda brother his buy bring load other mod.

2 tūrúzá pásí gà, lámbà jūm sīn
 trousers new top., number on simply

1 **Usmanu Jidda's junior brother bought some things at market and brought them back.**

2 **The new pair of trousers had a trademark on it.**

Notes

1 The Hausa word *kaya* is used for goods bought at market.
 The words *dōn bēn* are sometimes replaced by *sààdá* (-rì) or *sààdàwà* (-rì), from Hausa *tsàda* 'costliness'.

Lép is sometimes replaced by *tùùn* 'carry'.

2 *Tūrúzá* is, of course, borrowed from English, as is *lámbà*, although Bìsíwẹ̀ẹ̀rí is taking the latter from Hausa where it has all the meanings required in this context: 'trademark, number (size), vaccination scar'.

Tūrúzá can be replaced by *mày gúúgà* 'owner of a kind of rough white cloth (often used for shrouds). While *mài* is Hausa for 'owner', we find no reference to this cloth in the standard Hausa dictionaries.

Here is the explanation:

Ùsmánù Jiddà bèwéjé kẹ̀ẹ̀ í jím è tẹ̀ẹ̀, í gèt gùr ī Mòtùùmbíw
Usmanu Jidda junior brother his they get_up loc. there, they go over loc. Mutum Biu

í nóón: í gèt pèn kēēní. Tùùn kònà pèè é wàà gí wàā, í bà
they say: they go thing seek+inf.+asp. Carry smallpox return mod. with it when, they then

ń lāksikòón jūū dìm kōṓ, gáàn gàà dìm kōṓ wòṓ tīm váànbūràn,
they stay+caus+him+mod. up behind enclosure, loc. outside behind enclosure our under
stone+pl.+dem.

gáàn gàà dàà lóng míí àán. Í bà ī tẹ̀ẹ̀ Jáádā nèèbū réēn. Í kēká
loc. outside down gulley small dem. They then they take Jada person+pl. asp. They cut+us

lám̀bà, à bēn ī Fārēn kààm jẹ̀ pát, né-nwùù àán sām̀kù nàà púú
vaccination, loc. down loc. Faren town just all, woman dem. find+her in belly

pát, né-nwùù àán nàà púú nyéng dōn gà, tīksì gò. Sú/ú wòṓ nòkīn
all, woman dem. in belly blood other top., miscarry asp. God want I

nàà púú nyéng, kọ́ṓ nākù̀m pèn dōn só, kọ́ṓ bùm dèèn mǎá jīmsì só.
in belly blood, or make+me thing other not, or place dem. top. swell not.

Àmmá í kék Yààýá, í kēk Yààýá àán wàà, jím bà tūnèn à
But they vaccinate Yaaya, they vaccinate Yaaya dem. when, get_up then come_out loc.

gùr ī wá/á dōn àn. Tàká gà, nwàànéé nòk bè lāān láām. Í tūp tēē,
there loc. arm other dem. Night top., difficult I for sleep+inf. sleep. They pierce still,

túún só. Í nàk nyāā, túún só. Àán í tāārí nākēn àán pát, túún
grow_out not. They make how, grow_out not. Dem. they try make+inf. dem. all, grow-out

só. Háá-ràán pèn àán sālèn sālèn kòṓn è jūm Yààýá wá/àràán jẹ̀,
not. Long-dem. thing dem. diminish diminish be_lost loc. on Yaaya arm+dem. just

kàà ràán jẹ̀, kùn nímò nóó: Jiddà bèwéjé kẹ̀ẹ̀ túún bēná kááyá sààdà dōn bēēn.
like+dem. just, fact.+I sing+fact. say: Jidda brother his carry bring+us load expensive
other mod.

Usman Jidda's junior brother left here for Mutum Biu with some others saying they were going to find work. He brought smallpox back with him. So they sent him to stay up behind the compound enclosure, over among those stones on the other side of that little gulley. Then they took all the people from Jada and vaccinated us, everyone here in Faren, even women who were pregnant. Some who were two to three months pregnant miscarried. God willed that, I being in that state, either it did not affect me or there was no swelling at that spot. But they vaccinated Yaaya, and when they did, it showed up on the other arm. It was hard for me to sleep at night [because of crying]. They pierced it but it would not clear up. They tried everything with no result. This went on for a long time until the thing finally

went down and just disappeared. So I sang saying that Jidda's junior brother brought us back an expensive present.

To prepare for the leera (flute) festivities, the young men would go off to the towns to seek work so as to be able to buy fine clothes for the occasion. Usman Jidda's brother may have got clothes, but he also got smallpox. This situation was perfectly adapted to a play on the Hausa word *lambà*, which would cover the trademark on the clothing or fabric, the pock marks left by the disease, and the scar left by vaccination. Since she thinks the vaccination caused the abcess on her son's other arm, Bìsíwě́rì can reasonably say that what the young man brought back with him cost them all dearly.

According to Bìsíwě́rì's family, the last song in this collection was composed "by commission". Umaru Sanda, her husband's junior brother (and District Head of Mbulo at the time of this writing), who lived in Faren at that time, asked her to provide a catchy song to be sung on the occasion of the first use of his new drum. In this case, even more than for each of the preceding songs, we must leave the reader to imagine the musical quality of this piece from her words alone.

Song 22

- 1 mày gùmbà lép gààn gànggá bèè bép kẹ̀
 owner drum buy get drum mod.+with money his
- 2 bùm gāmkèn é nyāārè, Ùmàrù Sàndà, Yáám mírí
 place resound mod. how+q., Umaru Sanda, Yaam child
- 1 **The "gumba" owner has bought himself a two-headed drum with his own money.**
- 2 **How it resounds! Umaru Sanda, son of the Yaam clan.**

Notes

1 *Mài* 'owner' and *gàngga* 'two-headed drum' are both Hausa words. *Gùmbà*, however, is apparently not; its origin remains to be determined.

2 *Yáá zq́q*, Hausa for 'he has come', sometimes replaces *Yáám mírí*.

Conclusion

A few concluding remarks may help to set Bìsíwě́rì's songs in a wider context of traditional African music.

Rhythm: on the recording from which we have transcribed these songs, Bìsíwě́rì sings without rhythmic accompaniment. The outsider to Chamba musical tradition will nevertheless perceive the repetition of similar musical material within a strict periodicity. We use this perception as the basis for organising our transcriptions into numbered verses. We would, however, expect (from our knowledge of the music of neighbouring regions, see Arom 1991) each period to be divisible into a given number of equidistant pulsations. The words of the verse would

be distributed with respect to these pulsations in a specific way. The pulsations could presumably be provided not only by the singer herself, but by any participant in the same musical tradition.

Melody: the melody of each song is conditioned by the tones of its words. As a general rule, movement from a lower to a higher, or from a higher to a lower, tone requires a melodic movement in the same direction. This rule may be disobeyed in the course of a song, but not on every repetition of the same material. The proper relationship of the tones must be made apparent at least once.

Rhythmic and melodic variation: Chamba music, like that of most other African traditions, is based on achieving variation within repetition. As our notes to the individual songs show, certain words in a given verse may be replaced in the course of successive repetitions. Such variation is an intrinsic part of the song. It may be limited to simple word play (as when *bīrēn* 'become' replaces *gīrēn* 'abstain' in song 1, verse 2) or to creation of relations of synonymy and antonymy (as when *līi* 'eat', *nyáá* 'give' and *téé* 'take' alternate in verse 1 of song 3). In such cases, the original tones, number of syllables, and usually, basic syntactic structure are preserved. The new verse thus need involve no alterations to the rhythmic or melodic pattern. Substitution may, however, also lead to melodic variation, when, for example, a low-tone word replaces one with a high tone (song 21, verse 1, *tùùn* 'carry' for *lép* 'buy', or song 3, verse 1, *kèè* 'himself' for *téé* 'take', with rhyme as well, on successive repetitions). Likewise, longer words may replace shorter ones and words or phrases may be inserted, allowing rhythmic variation by a change in the relationship of words to pulsations. Additions often occur between two verses, where melodic rests may be provided in the singer's simplest pattern. This device may create new grammatical or semantic linkage between the verses, thus temporarily altering the cyclicity of the song.

Insertions within individual verses will never extend to replacement of the entire verse. Part of the material must remain unchanged so that repetitions can be recognised as such. An example of particularly rich variation is found in verse 1 of song 17, where the alliterative *súún sémén* 'handsome husband' and *sīn* 'only' are the only constant terms. Furthermore, the basic syntactic composition of this verse can be seen to be a short introductory sentence (always ending with a monosyllabic particle on non-low tone), followed by a longer interrogative sentence introduced by a topicalised noun phrase. Note that, on one occasion, Bisiwǽǽrí alters the structure of the longer sentence, substituting the vocative *páná* 'please' for the topicalised phrase and shifting the constant element, *sūn sémén*, into the following interrogative. But by retaining the short initial sentence, she assures that even syntactic rearrangement within the verse will remain partial.

The greatest length to which substitution can go is shown in verse 1 of song 4, where the first two variants have *Màányīnè mūm* 'the bank of Mayo Ini' as constant element, while the third (marked a) is linked to the second only by the singer's name, and has an entirely different syntactic structure. Bisiwǽǽrí of course supports recognisability by creating a special syntactic and semantic link with verse 2. This is certainly a limiting case of variation within repetition.

The features described above are undoubtedly found in the musical traditions of many African cultures. They are applications of formal principles of musical composition, not features of style. In each of her songs, Bisiwǽǽrí has a message (or set of messages on various levels) which she wants to transmit in an effective way through music. The style in her music is what gives it this "effectiveness", its ability to strike other Chamba as good music. Are there features of the "best" Chamba music which distinguish it from the "best" music of other African cultures with similar traditions? Are there features of Bisiwǽǽrí's music or of some specific songs in her repertory which earn it or them a higher degree of approval among the Chamba? These are questions to which we cannot reply, as we have conducted no cross-cultural studies of musical

traditions or surveys of musical preferences among the Chamba. We can, of course, easily spot structural features of Bisiwéérí's texts which can be identified, from our own literary perspective, as figures which give them depth and density, and we attempt to bring this out in some of our commentaries. To our knowledge, however, there is no explicit codification or analysis of such features among the Chamba. The best of new compositions are identified as such, but we have not yet carried out the investigations that might allow us to assume that any judgements on our part that wordplay is skillful or substitution and repetition are ingenious in specific instances, will always coincide with majority opinion among Chamba.

Note on the transcription of Chamba

Consonants: most Chamba consonants can be represented by familiar signs from the Roman alphabet: **b d f g j k l m n p r s t v w y** (and **h** in a few borrowed words). Chamba also has a few less familiar consonants which are represented by two consecutive letters: the 'labiovelars' **kp** and **gb** (found in many other African writing systems), the palatal **ny** (a nasal **y**), the velar **nw** (a nasal **w**) at the beginning of words and a corresponding **ng** (like the sound at the end of the English 'sing') between vowels and at the end of words, and the 'labiodental flap' written **vw**, a sound which is characteristic of several West Central African languages. Between vowels, Chamba will also allow certain groups of two consonants chosen from this set.

Vowels: some Chamba vowels can be represented easily by the ordinary Roman **a e i o u**. However, Chamba has two sounds for both **e** and **o** that we need to distinguish. The more common **e** sound is that which occurs in the verb *kèè* 'to look for' (similar to the English 'kept'); the more open sound in *kéé* 'to tear' is slightly less common, and so we employ the 'hooked' **ɛ** to represent it. The same applies to *wòò* 'to like' (similar to the English word 'law') and *wóó* 'to hide' (similar to the English 'hope').

Chamba also has a 'central' vowel, that occurs in *káá* 'to refuse' (similar to the English 'earn').

The full set of Chamba vowels, therefore, numbers eight: **a ɶ e ɛ i o ɔ u**.

Vowel length: in the examples just above, we have written each vowel twice. This is because Chamba can distinguish in some cases between 'long' and 'short' vowels. Although there are many cases in which lack of contrast means that no confusion could result, we have chosen to write vowels that can be clearly heard to last longer with double letters.

So as not to increase the number of special signs, we give borrowed words in a form corresponding to their Chamba pronunciation. The source word is cited in a footnote.

Tones: Chamba has three "registers": high, medium (or mid), and low. We represent them by marks placed above the letters which stand for the sound pronounced on the given level. Thus: *báá* 'to come', *gāā* 'egg', *dàà* 'to fall' carry respectively a high, a mid, and a low tone.

The representation of Chamba tone is complicated by the existence of a phenomenon which is known technically as "downstep". This means that a given tone, when compared with a preceding tone, may sound as if it were one register lower than it actually is (in particular, if a low tone is affected, it will sound as if Chamba has a fourth, extra-low register). The actual register of a downstepped tone must be determined by comparing it to the following tone

Downstep has been marked by placing a slash (/) before the affected syllable (usually the first in a word). This allows the great majority of words always to be written in the same way (with the same tones), whether they are affected by downstep or not.

Downstep occurs particularly after high tones which are derived from original low tones by some rule of grammar, and (perhaps a special case of the preceding) after the modal particle

é. It also appears before the next term in the predicate following high-tone verbs (or high-tone clitic object pronouns, after a low-high modulated tone). For the purposes of this paper, we have omitted marks for this type of downstep, which we believe the native speaker will supply automatically. In this way, our notation will appear less cluttered. We are required, however, to mark downstep in those terms which could be analysed in isolation as having high-mid tone, but which behave as having a high/high sequence in context, e.g. *sú/ú* 'sun; God'. Words of this type which end in a non-nasal consonant cause downstepping of the following term. We therefore write, *sát /mè* 'my problem'.

Translations: below the Chamba text, we provide a word-by-word translation so that the reader can pick out the general meanings of individual elements. Given the current state of our understanding of Chamba grammar, the exact meanings and functions of grammatical modifiers and relational words may be improperly or insufficiently specified. We hope to be able to remedy these inadequacies in future publications. For the time being, we use the following abbreviations in our word-for-word translations: asp. = aspect marker; caus. = causative; cont. = contrary to fact; dem. = demonstrative; euph. = euphonic extension; fact. = factitive; foc. = focaliser; freq. = frequentative; fut. = future; ide. = ideophone; imp. = imperative; inf. = infinitive; inj. = injunctive; loc. = locative; mod. = modal; pl. = plural; pres. = presentative; q. = interrogative; rel. = relative; top. = topicaliser.

In addition to the word-for-word translation, we offer a free translation to assist readers whose main interest is in the meaning of Bisíwéérí's songs.

References

Arom, Simha, 1991. *African polyphony and polyrhythm: musical structure and methodology*. Translated by Raymond Boyd. Cambridge: CUP.

Fardon, Richard, 1988. *Raiders and refugees: trends in Chamba political development 1750-1950*. Washington: Smithsonian.

---, 1991. *Between God, the dead and the wild: Chamba interpretations of religion and ritual*. Edinburgh and Washington: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute and Smithsonian.

---, 1993, Alliance et ethnicité: aspects d'un système régional de l'Adamaoua, in Françoise Héritier Augé and Elisabeth Copet-Rougier, eds., *Les complexités de l'alliance*, Volume III: *Economie, politique et fondements symboliques (Afrique)*. Paris: Editions des Archives contemporaines, pp. 165-210.

Notes

1. For support of fieldwork since 1987: Boyd is grateful to CNRS and Fardon to the Carnegie Foundation, University of St. Andrews and British Academy. Both acknowledge the official support of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, and of the Chief of Ganye and his traditional council, as well as of the different administrators who have held local government office since 1987. Graham Furniss (SOAS) was kind enough to help us with a critical reading of this text.

2. There are a number of versions of the foundation of Mbulo; this one was favoured by Bìsíwéǵrí. However, other accounts would suggest it unlikely that her actual grandfather would have been old enough to lead the founding party.
3. Details on Chamba Area Reorganisation 1933-40 can be found in the 'Yola Profile' G3 and G3A at the Nigerian National Archives Kaduna.
4. It is not certain whether Aliyu Umaru was the first holder of this position.
5. Unpublished work by Esperanza Ruiz suggests that certain themes are widespread and have analogues in women's songs in many parts of the world. Themes are stated in global terms, though the analogues are integrated in specific ways in different cultures. Complexes of notions seem to recur (as when 'regret' is associated with expressions of 'loneliness' and 'insecurity'). It may be objected that the identification of these themes is simply a projection of an investigator's cultural categories. Whether the analogues would be recognised as such from the standpoints of members of different culture remains an unanswered question of comparative aesthetics. Even conceding the possibility of generalising about themes, there is no guarantee that the frequent occurrence of a theme cross-culturally has interesting implications. Because this approach is debatable, in addition to ordering Bìsíwéǵrí's songs thematically we also provide an explanation of content from Chamba perspectives.